

# FORMAL AND INFORMAL LANGUAGE

Formal academic writing is quite different from informal spoken English. The differences can best be seen from a number of examples. In general, informal spoken English contains a number of colloquialisms (conversational expressions) that are inappropriate for formal written English. It is important not to mix the styles.

Written academic English will **not** normally contain the following:

## Contractions

✗ **INCORRECT**

it didn't  
they've

✓ **CORRECT**

it did not  
they have

## Hesitation Fillers

✗ **INCORRECT**

er  
um  
well

## Personal Pronouns

✗ **INCORRECT**

I think this is an effective plan.  
**You** put the chemicals in the test tube.  
**We** used two different methods research.

✓ **CORRECT**

This could be an effective plan.  
The chemicals **are put** in the test tube.  
**There** were two different methods of research.

Personal pronouns are sometimes used, but are often avoided by means of a modal verb (*could, might* etc.), an impersonal word such as *it* or *there*, or a verb in the passive voice.

## Informal/Imprecise Words

✗ **INCORRECT**

lots of  
nice  
big  
things  
like

✓ **CORRECT**

many  
excellent, pleasant  
large  
reasons, problems  
such as

## Abbreviated forms

### ✗ INCORRECT

it's  
they're  
e.g.  
i.e.  
etc.

### ✓ CORRECT

it is  
they are  
for example  
that is  
and so on

## A COMPARISON

Compare the following texts. The first is informal and spoken, the second formal and written (from a journal article).

### Informal/Spoken

This guy, Hewson, right, he says that people that speak English, like native speakers, don't think about when to use words like 'the', they just do it.

### Formal/Written

Hewson (1972, p. 132) has called the English article system a 'psychomechanism', through which native speakers use articles correctly but unconsciously.

(Miller, JL 2005, 'Most of ESL students have trouble with the articles', *International Education Journal*, ERC2004 Special Issue, vol., 5, no. 5, pp. 80-88)

## EXERCISE I

The following sentences are mixed **formal** and **informal**. Write F (formal) or I (informal) in the brackets after each sentence.

- a. The project will be completed next year. [ ]
- b. I showed that his arguments didn't hold water. [ ]
- c. I wonder why he put up with those terrible conditions for so long. [ ]
- d. Five more tests will be necessary before the experiment can be concluded. [ ]
- e. It is possible to consider the results from a different viewpoint. [ ]
- f. It has been proved that the arguments so far are without foundation. [ ]
- g. He'll have to do another five tests before he can stop the experiment. [ ]
- h. It is not clear why such terrible conditions were tolerated for so long. [ ]
- i. There are a number of reasons why the questionnaire should be revised. [ ]
- j. We'll finish the job next year. [ ]

## DEFINITE AND TENTATIVE WAYS OF WRITING

A feature of written academic English is the need to be careful (i.e. to show that you may not be certain about something). The purpose of this is to show that one is generalising or desires to be cautious, or even that one *might possibly* be wrong (though it is not *likely!*).

(The three preceding words in italics are examples of such language in use.)

The most usual ways of expressing caution or lack of certainty are by means of verbs and adverbs.

### **Verbs**

appears to  
seems to  
tends to  
may  
might

### **Adverbs**

perhaps  
possibly  
probably  
apparently  
likely

The following sentence is a **definite** statement:

Industrialisation is viewed as a superior way of life.

To make it more **tentative** or **cautious** we can change or add some words:

Industrialisation **tends to** be viewed as a superior way of life.

## EXERCISE 2

Now look at the following sentences taken from an economics book:

- a. It is also likely to appear in the development of institutions.
- b. The ideal of economic development tends to be associated with different policy goals.
- c. Perhaps greater clarity can be brought to the meaning of economic development.

How would the above three sentences be written if we wanted to make them **definite** and not **tentative**?

(from Jordan, RR 1990, *Academic writing course*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Collins ELT, London)

## ANSWERS

### Exercise 1

- |    |   |    |   |
|----|---|----|---|
| a. | F | f. | F |
| b. | I | g. | I |
| c. | I | h. | F |
| d. | F | i. | F |
| e. | F | j. | I |

### Exercise 2

- a) It also appears in the development of institutions.
- b) The ideal of economic development is associated with different policy goals.
- c) Greater clarity should be brought to the meaning of economic development.

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